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Amherst awaits parking study



By SCOTT MERZBACH
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AMHERST – Many residents, business owners and visitors have formed opinions about the availability of parking in downtown Amherst, often expressing concern to town officials that there are not enough spaces, with some calling for construction of a second parking garage.

With a parking data collection project scheduled to begin Thursday, led by Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates of Boston, town officials should soon learn the extent of the crunch on parking, both on a typical day and at peak times when events are taking place in Amherst center.

“We really need data to fully understand what is happening with parking,” said Senior Planner Jeffrey Bagg, who coordinated three downtown parking forums, beginning in September 2014, with the input leading to a final parking report in October.

But an analysis of the use of parking spaces in downtown is being done for the first time since 2008, when the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission conducted a study for the town.

Since then, there is a consensus that parking is more difficult, in part caused by the growing popularity of the Amherst Cinema and various dining destinations, and construction of new mixed-used projects, Boltwood Place and Kendrick Place, that provide housing but little parking.

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“We need the data because anecdotally people say demand has increased,” Bagg said. “We don’t want to rely on anecdotes. We want to rely on data.”

Nelson\Nygaard will provide an updated inventory of all public and private spaces in the downtown area, which is bounded by the University of Massachusetts campus to the north, Lincoln Avenue to the west, the Amherst College campus to the south, and Dickinson and Triangle streets to the east.

On Thursday, Bagg said members of the data collection team will go around the center making observations in two-hour loops, starting at 7 a.m. and ending at 9 p.m. On Saturday, the team will be on the streets from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Finally, on April 23, the data collection team will be out during the Amherst Farmers Market, the Daffodil Days events in town center and a day when activity is also occurring on the UMass campus.

During these days, which may be rescheduled if there is inclement weather, consultants with clipboards will do so-called "intercept surveys" in which they will ask people questions about their parking habits. This, coupled with the real-time data, will give the consultants a sense of the current usage and demand, and the ability to forecast what the future holds for parking in Amherst.

"The initial response is to make sure existing parking is being used as efficiently as possible," Bagg said.

Nelson\Nygaard will also make recommendations for handling events, such as the Celebrate Amherst Block Party, and how systems can be established to make sure there is enough parking.

People will also be able to complete surveys about their experience with parking. These will be available on the town's website, amherstma.gov.

At the end of the process, the consultants will lead roundtable discussions to discuss their findings.

Amherst is paying Nelson\Nygaard \$40,000 to complete the work, money that comes from the town's transportation enterprise fund.

Bagg said the town had originally hoped to tap into \$1 million set aside by former Gov. Deval Patrick for use by communities studying parking, but that money was cut by Gov. Charlie Baker.

Meanwhile, the downtown parking report recommended establishing a Downtown Parking Working Group to examine the report and make recommendations to the Select Board.

This working group is not yet formed, but Select Board member Constance Kruger said Monday that 13 residents have expressed interest by completing citizen activity forms. Members will be chosen in the coming weeks.

Even without the working group in place, Bagg said the town is moving forward with one long-planned parking initiative. The town recently ordered six large vinyl banners and a few smaller metal signs, all of which are blue with white lettering, that will help visitors find parking, including the Boltwood parking garage, the Town Hall parking lot and the lot behind the CVS Pharmacy on North Pleasant Street.

"The goal is to have the new banners up before UMass graduation" May 6, Bagg said.

The first topic the working group may consider, Bagg said, is revisions to the winter parking ban, which in Amherst runs from Dec. 1 to April 1 and mandates that no vehicles be left on streets overnight, instead requiring people to park in the lower level of the parking garage or in the Pray Street parking lot.

But as more people are living downtown, the 56 spaces between the two is no longer sufficient, Bagg said.

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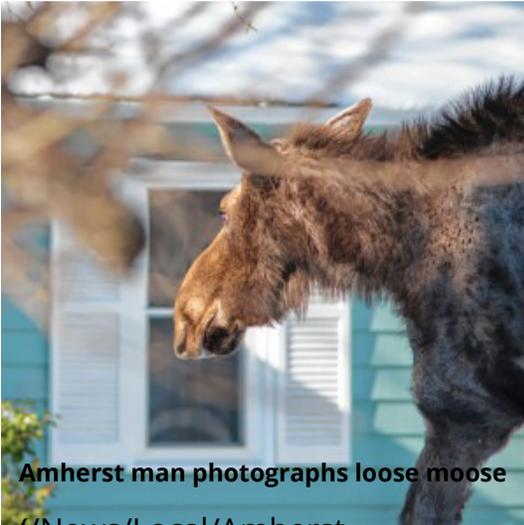
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